

# **Relocating Refugees in Developed Countries: The Poverty Experiences of Somali Resettling in New Zealand**

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## **X.1 Introduction**

Since the 1940s, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has worked to relocate refugees into host countries. These host countries are primarily developed and highly westernized countries, such as Canada, the USA, Australia, Norway, and New Zealand. The majority of refugees, of course, remain in camps or are moved back to their country of origin when appropriate, and only a small percentage get relocated in this way.

Despite the small percentages being relocated, the problems and issues that they face can tell us much about migration experiences in general and about the role of poverty and economic standing for migrants in particular. It is often assumed, for example, that because the refugees are not only coming from a poverty situation in their country of origin but also from refugee camps, that they should do well in their new, developed country, that they should be able to do much better than staying in a refugee camp, and that they should be happy and grateful for their opportunity in a host country. It turns out, however, that there are many problems awaiting them when relocating (e.g., Al-Ali, Black and Koser 2001; El-Solh 1991; McGown 1999; McSpadden 1987; Valtonen, 1999).

This paper describes some of those problems, using our research experiences of the Somali refugee community in Hamilton, New Zealand, and the extant literature on resettlement of refugees into developed countries. We must remember through this that poverty is relative (cf. Mejía, 2000), and some of the economic woes for refugees in their new country might seem small problems compared to those left behind in camps, but the problems are real and painful nonetheless to those involved.

## **X.2 Poverty in Somalia**

According to the United Nations, Somalia is one of the poorest countries in the world. Somalia is in the category of Least Developed Country with a ranking of 172 out of 174 on the Human Development Index (HDI).

Poverty can be measured by looking at literacy rates, life expectancy, and infant mortality rates. Out of the six countries in the Horn of Africa (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan), Somalia has the lowest Gross National Product per capita, the lowest adult literacy rates (49.7 percent for men, 25.8 percent for women), the second lowest life expectancy rate (48 years, Ethiopia has lowest rate), and the highest infant mortality rates (132/1000). Somalia also has an under-5 mortality rate of 224/1000, and only 0.4 doctors and 2.0 nurses per 100,000 people. Other contributors to the poverty of Somalia are the only 1.5% of children between 1 and 2 years who are vaccinated against all childhood diseases, and of children under 5, 17.2% are moderately undernourished and 3.5% are severely undernourished. Finally, only 28% of the population has access to safe drinking water and 48.5% have access to safe excreta disposal (United Nations, 2002).

Population estimates of Somalia vary from around 5 million up to an estimated 9 million people (World Bank, 2002). There are believed to be about 350,000 Internally Displaced Persons and over 450,000 refugees. Traditionally, Somalis have been nomadic pastoralists or semi-nomadic herders (60 percent of the population) and only about 15-20% of the population are town dwellers. It is estimated that 41.9% of children between 5 - 14 years of age are currently working.

War and civil conflict in Somalia is of course the major contributor to the dislocation of Somalis. But from all this information, it is easy to see why so many Somalis are refugees and seeking a better life in a new country. Their arrival, however, is usually marked by a long history of poverty conditions.

## **X.3 Issues Affecting Social Mobility during Resettlement**

While the majority of immigrants or refugees experience some challenges (e.g., new language, different religions) when moving to a new country, Somalis, and particularly Somali women, generally encounter a whole range of difficulties when they are relocated to a Western developed country. The main ones include (but are not limited to) a different culture, religion, colour (race), and language but:

*Other critical settlement issues for African refugees include employment options, suitable accommodation, language skills, culturally accessible educational systems, adequate child-care services, financial services and information and reception services (Patrick, 2001).*

Many cultural practices of Somali make successful economic resettlement in a Western country difficult (Valtonen, 1999). For example, Somali need to socialize with the members of the community where they resettle for employment and social support, but the gender constraints on socializing, and the religious implications concerning food, can

often inhibit successful socializing and employment with Westerners. Being invited for a meal, a common practice in Western cultures, can be difficult with a Somali family when the men and women are meant to be separated and any meat prepared needs to be Halal-killed. Such problems can potentially be accommodated, but require cultural and religious understanding and sensitivity by host cultures (Summerfield, 1993).

Another issue related to culture is that Somalia has not been a politically stable country for a very long time. This means that for many Somalis, even their own cultural practices have been diverted as they cope in transient situations, like refugee camps, which makes it very difficult to then accommodate to life in a developed Western country. For example, a 15 year old boy may have been surviving in a refugee camp with no formal education, and no training of any sort, for the last 10 years. He suddenly finds his application accepted for settlement in New Zealand and, although he has never learned English and has never been to school, he finds himself in a high school classroom, expected to behave as the other teenagers do. Obviously this presents great challenges for the students, the teachers, the family and the boy himself, and makes the chance of economic integration unlikely.

The overwhelming majority of Somalis are Muslims. Generally, a person's religion is not identifiable by mere visual inspection of the follower. However, for most Muslim women, and especially Somali women, their religion is immediately identified through their dress. The majority of Somali women wear *hijab*, (long dresses and scarves with arms and head covered) and many Somali women wear brightly coloured *hijab*, thereby increasing their visibility in a primarily Christian, Western-dressing, country. Although this increased visibility can be seen as a positive contribution it also makes them an easier target for discrimination and harassment. Women are often told that they cannot have a job because of their dress, or the dress codes of certain employers prevent women from gaining employment (Shih, 2002).

As black Africans, integration of Somalis into a primarily Caucasian society is further challenged and issues of discrimination and harassment abound. Whereas men are not as easily identified as Muslims (above) as women, both men and women are identified as "different" due to their colour. Again, this can be viewed as a positive contribution to the diversity of a Western society, but also makes Somalis targets of discrimination and harassment. For example, a young school-aged girl interviewed by us about harassment at school said that she was told once by a Maori child (indigenous people of New Zealand who usually have brown skin), "You're black, *really* black." Her clever reply was, "I happen to *like* that colour!"

Refugees are also primarily women and children, since many of the men have been killed or are missing. This means that the family's economic prospects in new countries are lessened, given the work structure available, and it also means that women often are needed to do jobs such as fruit picking or cleaning, in order to provide for their families. This is usually non-traditional and prevents them from other work they traditionally do such as child-care. While taking on new roles and employment can be seen as a positive factor, in the households without men at all no one else is left to do jobs like child-care

and cooking except younger children. These combining factors make for poor health adjustment for both the women and the children (Allotey, 1998; Manderson, Kelaher, Markovic, and McManus, 1998).

Finally, while some Somali speak, read and write English, many do not, and many only speak the Somali language and cannot read or write it. This presents a number of difficulties in a primarily paper-based, bureaucratic culture and economy (Majka, 2001; Schneider, 2000). This difficulty primarily concerns the older Somalis and less-educated youth who come as refugees. Many of the younger Somalis and the more-educated do not have as much difficulty learning the language, but for those whom language is a problem, the problems are enormous. Difficulty with English influences appropriate access to health services, education, employment, and everyday negotiation in shops, petrol stations, postal services, etc. (Stevens, 1993; Strand, 1984; Waxman, 2001; Wooden, 1991).

All these factors mean that upon arrival in a developed country, the refugees immediately end on the bottom of the pile for poverty conditions relative to that new country. One informal observation our Somali collaborators have told us is that many of their community seem happy and grateful when they arrive, but that after about five years some begin to have reservations (Shelley, 2001). This comes from being unemployed, not having qualifications recognized, building up some debts they find hard to pay off, wishing they had been better warned, and seeing their children not doing well at school (for reasons given above).

#### **X.4 The Effects of Poverty on Life in New Zealand**

Experience of extreme poverty conditions in Africa influences how refugees adapt to life in their host country. Many of the strategies that refugees learn when in the poverty conditions no longer work or are not appropriate in their host country. For example, parenting styles, mental (social) health, economic expectations, food choices and lifestyle are all affected by poverty conditions and all influence behaviours in host countries.

Both in Somalia and in refugee camps, parenting styles are influenced by a number of circumstances. For example, mothers walk, sometimes long distances, for food and water, meaning that older children have to look after younger children, or children have to look after themselves. By Western standards, such responsibility placed on sometimes very young children verges on neglect and abuse, but is the accepted way of life in a refugee camp. Another example is the high infant mortality rates, as mentioned above, that may result in detached parenting. Specifically, a mother may make less effort to feed and care for a newly-born baby who develops a cough. In Western standards, again, this mother may be viewed as a “bad” mother, but in Somalia, or in a refugee camp, the chances are that a baby with a cough has tuberculosis and will die shortly. In context, the behaviours make good sense, but when these behaviours are carried over to a host country they become problematic. These behaviours and experiences are not easy to change, especially when considering the length of time that many refugees have lived in camps or in poverty

conditions. Most of the problems with parental styles come from the history of poverty and the current poverty situations of the families.

Life on the bottom of the economic heap in a developed country also comes with a cost in “mental” health (Abbott, 1987; McSpadden, 1987). This applies to all people in poverty situations, not just refugees. One of the problems, however, that we have encountered is that refugees are quite often automatically assumed to be experiencing trauma-related symptoms when they show signs of mental health problems (Summerfield, 2000). Our experience is that most are troubled by missing and absent family, and by untenable economic situations that inhibit helping themselves and long-term prospects, rather than anything to do with war-related trauma (although not excluding this).

Many refugees have an expectation that life will be good when they get to a Western country for resettlement, and especially economic participation. What is not expected is that life is *different* rather than better (Samarasinghe and Arvidsson, 2002). In one woman’s words: “...Life was hard, really hard, when we lived in a refugee camp. We had to walk everyday for food. We didn’t have refrigerators to keep perishables. But life here is hard too, in different ways. Now we have refrigerators, but I have to take my children to school, pick them up, pay for petrol, car insurance, rent, doctor visits...” For many, family who are left behind in camps have the expectation that their family in a Western country can now send them money for food and will be able to get them relocated as well. However, because of many of the issues discussed in this paper, many Somalis are unemployed and depend on government benefits, leaving little, if anything, to send back to Africa in the form of remittances. Even to achieve some family reunification in New Zealand, the family must supply an airfare, application costs, and other costs for the relocating relatives.

Another example of the influence of poverty is on food choices. For example, sugar is a highly sought commodity in refugee camps for which women may be raped, badly injured or killed. When refugees come to their host country, the easy availability of sugar results in high sugar consumption—at least temporarily. This has been tackled in our community work by implementing exercise classes and holding seminars on nutrition and other family health issues (Guerin, Diiriyee, Corrigan, and Guerin, 2002).

Finally, there are many lifestyle problems resulting from the relative poverty experienced by refugees in developed countries. Most activities and interests that could be engaged in previously are now found to depend upon money, and other lifestyle practices are not available in the new country or are not acceptable. For example, soccer has always been one of the key activities for Somali boys (and some girls). In New Zealand, however, we find that Somali boys limit themselves primarily to playing in a Somali league of soccer games, and not joining in with school teams. Part of this is due to the costs required to play for western soccer teams, which are mostly taken for granted by other school families. As well, many of the children wish to go to good schools but for them there are prohibitive costs of school uniforms and books, items that most western families can take for granted. Poverty affects the schooling and development of children (Beiser, Hou, Kasper, and Noh. 2000).

## X.5 Conclusions

We find then that the coupling of a history of poverty with problems in making a transition out of poverty upon resettlement, lead to a number of very negative outcomes for refugees in developed countries. The causal links are many and varied; for example, not having money meaning that a child cannot go to a school with expensive uniforms meaning that their choice in education is limited which then limits their employment or further education. It is for these reasons that some families feel very poor and dissatisfied with their new country after a few years.

To really overcome these problems we cannot change their history that brought them the label of refugees, but we can do a lot to change their employment prospects, their education, their children's education, and their dealing with everyday life in situations of poverty. We can also learn from other poor and disadvantaged groups about how to live and get out of poverty cycles. Some refugee families report that they see their generation as mostly a lost one, but that they are fixating on having their children in a better life situation by concentrating the family's resources on education and employment for the children (Zhou and Bankston, 2001). This does not have to be the only way out of poverty in a developed country, and we aim to help the employment situations for all refugees, not just the children and a future generation.

## X.6 References

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